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ABSTRACT

This paper surveys the teaching of second languages in Irish primary and post-primary schools. In the centralized primary school system, with primary teacher-training directed towards state-controlled qualifying examinations, government policy now favors the teaching of Irish side by side with English (also an official language). With the establishing of the Linguistic Institute of Ireland, a linguist was commissioned to outline a procedure permitting the production of materials for teacher training and remedial work. When trained personnel are available, further work will proceed to improve guidance and materials for teaching English in Ireland. The urgency of the task of saving the Irish language from extinction has so far directed most activities in applied linguistics and pedagogy toward improving the teaching of it as a second language in the greater part of the country where it has been superseded by English. "Buntus Gaelige" [Foundation-Beginnings in Irish], the results of the linguistic inquiry, is now officially presented throughout the entire school system with the aid of graded courses for the teaching of Irish as a subject from entry into primary schools up to the highest standard (4,500 primary schools outside the Irish-speaking areas). A special course for secondary level is also available. Interdisciplinary three-year programs are being planned. (AMM)

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TEACHING OF SECOND LANGUAGES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NATIONAL POLICY OF LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE IN IRELAND 1960 - 1970

Colmán L. Ó Huallacháin

1. 1 Teaching of second languages in Irish schools (primary and post-primary) has been deeply influenced (1) organizationally by the systems taken over when independent political rule was attained fifty years ago.

(2) pedagogically by views of applied linguists (such as Jesperson, Sweet, Palmer) which were adopted enthusiastically from the early part of the century by those supporting the reintroduction of the ancestral Irish language into education and life in general (after the catastrophic decline of knowledge and use of it over the previous hundred years).

1. 2 In the centralized primary school system, with primary teacher-training directed towards state-controlled qualifying examinations, government policy which favoured the teaching of Irish side by side with English (which is also an official language) was brought to bear quickly with relative ease. Most post-primary schools had a great deal of autonomy and influence could only be brought to bear at that level through financial inducements which were available if pupils took examinations which included Irish as an essential subject, with additional grants in cases where other subjects were taught through Irish.

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1. 3 The degree of influence of the central educational authority on the various levels of the school system has been important in the rapid widespread introduction of new techniques within the past few years.

1. 4 This has been helped by the orientation towards direct-method teaching which characterized the training and practice of the majority of teachers, especially at primary level. Besides, a certain disillusionment about the results of forty years of teaching Irish at all levels, and concern about standards of English also, made educators quite ready to try out new suggestions. 1)

2. 1 The teaching of English to native speakers of Irish and to speakers of rural varieties of Hiberno-English is a field in which experimental work is beginning with a view to providing linguistically reliable materials and directives. The influence of the ancestral Irish language on the speech of such learners caused them to feel socially disadvantaged not only if they went abroad to English-speaking countries but among speakers of certain other varieties of Hiberno-English at home. In addition to the problem created by such an unsatisfactory position regarding English, there was a possibility that this state of affairs would produce negative attitudes towards the positions and time given to Irish in the schools, both in Irish-speaking areas and elsewhere.

2. 2 Indeed, even before work began on improving materials for teaching Irish, anxiety was expressed about the neglect of attention to the problem of teaching English in Ireland:

"Pseudo-scientific opinions about the standard of English seriously menace the advance of Irish in education. My view is that the English of educated people in this country should be regarded as an historic variety of that world language (...) and that the progress of pupils should be assessed on that basis. Linguistic research into that problem take priority over any other research about standards. Where is there any sign of beginning such research !" 2)

2. 3 "It is true that there is no difference between the English of the school-books in the two countries [Britain and Ireland]. There are, however, positive definite courses laid down in Britain to teach standard English to sections of the population who speak some regional dialect. In addition, the children realise at an early stage the socio-economic importance of the standard language and this encourages them to learn it. This is not the case in Ireland. Regional non-prestige varieties of English are spoken in Ireland - they have their own characteristics as regards phonology, morphology, syntax and vocabulary. No regional variety is given any recognised position of prestige, although pronounced regionalism is generally regarded with disfavour, and accordingly, there is no positive objective when teaching English and neither,

of course , is there any definite course laid down. Pupils finishing their school course have only a passive knowledge of school-book English. Fr. Macnamara does not concede that there is any importance in this difference between the two countries. In this, we cannot agree with him."

2. 4 As soon as the Linguistic Institute of Ireland was established a linguist was commissioned to outline a procedure which would permit us to produce certain materials for teacher training and remedial work with the minimum delay. These will be available for experiment in teacher training colleges and certain schools in the coming academic year. The general phonological features of Hiberno-English are shown by means of words selected on bases of frequency of occurrence and aptness as illustration of patterns. The purpose of the materials is to train teachers and pupils to be able to consciously adjust the phoneme pattern of their own variety of English so as to transfer consistently to a more acceptable variety for certain domains of use, if they need to do so. As target, the speech of an educated townsman widely known and apparently widely found acceptable on television and radio, was selected as likely to be suitable for this purpose. Work still remains to be done to assess reactions to this proposal when it is put on trial. It is hoped that this way of tackling the problem will overcome the danger of rejection and derision which historical and social reasons might easily produce if remedial materials were brought from abroad to overcome the disadvantages referred to above.

2. 5 As soon as extra trained personnel are available further work will proceed to improve guidance and materials for teaching English in Ireland. It is certain that sociological and psychological factors must be given special consideration in this area of linguistic planning; for that reason at present three are being trained to doctoral level in the areas of psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and linguistics applied to language teaching.

2. 6 It seems appropriate to refer here to the large number of native speakers of English who leave Ireland to teach abroad. No systematic training in the teaching of English as a second language is provided at home for such people, nor is it likely that official Irish agencies would give this priority consideration at present. Lack of awareness of the features of their own variety of English is a disadvantage to these professionally. I feel this is a matter which should not go unmentioned at a gathering such as this, because if some means could be found to provide courses periodically (say, every three or four years) the good results would, I think, be available in many places all over the world.

3. 1 The urgency of the task of saving Irish from extinction has so far directed most of our activities in applied linguistics and pedagogy towards improving the teaching of it as a second language in the greater part of the country where it has been superseded by English.

3. 2 Efforts made since the foundation of the State to have Irish learned and spoken by the largest possible number of people led to considerable neglect of the sounds of the language. This is all the more regrettable since so much else had been learned from the linguists who advocated an oral and direct method of teaching, so much that continued to be faithfully applied at all levels of schooling.

3. 3 I agree with Professor Tomás De Bhaldraithe's description of the situation:

"The enthusiasm of the language revivalist, which produced such slogans as 'Broken Irish is better than good English' and such statements as 'Our mouths were not made to pronounce English sounds' still propagates the idea that an English-speaking Irishman can learn to speak Irish by just speaking'naturally'. Propaganda of this sort, together with the fact that the carrying over of the English sounds into Irish by learners, is associated with membership of a respectable urban middle-class, whereas the native sound system belongs to a poor rural community, makes the task of the teacher more than usually difficult. To complicate matters further, this substitution of English sounds for Irish ones has gained certain acceptance among public speakers, in the school, on the political platform, on the stage and in the pulpit (...) The first problem then is to attempt to establish a normal attitude among students to the learning of a new spoken language."[4)]

3.4 Phonetic descriptions of the various dialects of Irish are numerous and of high standard.[5] Now attempts are being made to apply phonological study to improving the teaching of oral Irish, beginning with attention to teacher-training. A text-book has been prepared which outlines for teachers an approach aiming first at phonemic accuracy and providing systematic pronunciation drill with accompanying tapes.[6]

3. 5 A second and more elaborate study was an experiment in applied dialectology.[7] The rapid production of recorded language-teaching tapes under the auspices of a central educational authority for use all over the country made it desirable that there should be some kind of pronunciational norm.

"Teaching is by nature a prescriptive activity and is therefore very much handicapped by the lack of a definite norm which would serve as a target of instruction Since an easily definable standardized variety of the language has not developed naturally in Modern Irish, one solution to the problem - which may or may not be the best one - is to construct an artificial norm which as far as possible would be equally relatable to the various regional varieties. This is the solution proposed in this paper. The proposal of course, must be regarded as very tentative because, even if it had been

possible to work out more objectives principles for the selection of standardized forms, the result would still need to be tested feature by feature against the subjective reaction of nonsophisticated speakers from different areas and modified, if necessary, accordingly. As an instrument in language teaching the function of the norm would be that pupils who have learned it would have little difficulty in understanding any regional variety of the language and, at a certain level of proficiency, could easily learn the rules to convert to the regional variety with which they had most contact. On the other hand, pupils who would not go on to learn a specific regional variety would have command of a speech which, though differing to some extent from all actual dialects, would contain - ideally at any rate - no non-Irish features and would be both comprehensible and acceptable to all speakers of the language.."[8)]

3. 6 Besides the purpose of helping the teaching of Irish as a second language, a sociolinguistic consideration (concerning the maintenance of Irish in the areas where it is still spoken) entered here:

"Concentration on the problems created by the revival seems to have obscured the cultural exigencies of the Irish-speaking communities themselves. As a consequence of this some kind of sociolinguistic programme aimed at a revitalization

of language loyalty and community pride is now an urgent necessity for the Gaeltacht [Irish-speaking areas]- the only alternative is almost certainly a total shift to English during the next generation or two. An important instrument in such a programme, by helping to counteract the fragmentation which which exists to-day, would be the common possession by the regionally and dialectically separate communities of the Gaeltacht of an accepted and standardized speech. This would not be designed to supplant the regional varieties of the language but would constitute the speech register of the wider (inter group) and more formal communication which could be expected to develop as a result of a successful revitalization programme.[9)]

3. 7 As a means of integrating cultural content in the teaching of Irish from the outset, a collection was made of children's rhymes, riddles and word games in the Irish-speaking areas. A selection of these has been arranged to serve as pronunciation drills in the schools (according to the system taught to teachers in their training courses, see section 3.4 above) and the words are being set to music and recorded by native speakers so as to be made more attractive for learners.

3. 8 Hundreds of thousands of words of recorded conversations from Irish-speaking areas provided the basis for the study of **vocabulary**, verb-morphology and syntax which was designed to show the kind of Irish which should be taught in order that an initial measure of performance would be attained as soon as possible. The techniques employed were an

elaboration of those pioneered by the CREDIF team which produced le francais fondamental. [10] Morphological features and syntactic units were coded and counted as well as vocabulary items. In addition an element of contrast with the source-language was introduced in the study of topical vocabulary: the words considered by informants (children and adults) in the English-speaking districts to be most needed in discussion of 20 topics were listed side by side with the results of a parallel study made in the Irish-speaking districts.

3. 9 Buntús Gaeilge [11] [foundation-beginnings in Irish] the results of the linguistic enquiry, is now officially presented throughout the entire school system with the aid of graded courses for the teaching of Irish as a subject from entry into primary schools up to the highest standard (4,500 primary schools outside the Irish-speaking areas), and for the benefit of those who have already gone on to secondary schooling a special course is available.

3. 10 The preliminary linguistic work for Buntús Gaeilge began in 1963. In 1966-67 two audio-lingual-visual conversational courses for senior infants and first standard were tested in 100 and 150 schools respectively and after revision were sent out to all schools the next year. (Because the training of all teachers had been according to the Direct Method it was not necessary to give them more than directives on some techniques which give a new precision to that approach). Between 1967 and 1969 similar work was done and provision made for junior infants and third and fourth standards. Materials for the two final standards of primary schools were tested in 200 schools last year and after revision are now being taught

in all schools. From first standard onwards reading and writing follows conversational work and does not exceed the amount of language prescribed for each stage. Commercial publishers produce the readers and workbooks for the pupils and they are planned to complement the teacher's book, flannelboard and figurines and tapes which are issued by the Government to serve as basis for the conversational work. Materials of the same kind are being prepared for secondary schools, but their introduction into all schools is organizationally more difficult and slow (see section 1. 2 above).

3. 11 Further linguistic studies are now proceeding to supplement what has been going on. Written Irish and Irish as it used for teaching other subjects on the curriculum (primary and secondary) is now being analysed so as to provide Buntús Gaeilge II - indications of what should get priority in courses for students who have assimilated the amount of Irish which has been built into the initial fundamental stages.

3. 12 Parents and the general public have had the Irish in Buntús presented to them on a television and radio teaching programme (with accompanying booklets). This was planned and written in closest collaboration with the teams which produced the school courses[12]. So far, however, no entertainment programme or reading materials have been designed to suit people whose repertoire in Irish is confined to little more than Buntús. There is also grave need for much more recorded native speech from the various Irish-speaking areas so as to facilitate better and broader passive knowledge of the spoken language. Another lack, which is at present getting

priority attention, is provision for objective testing of language achievement and for socio-linguistic assessment of results and attitudes to the two languages in our school system.

4. 1 The Linguistic Institute of Ireland was established by the Government with these principal objects:

(i) To initiate, promote and carry out linguistic and allied research with the aim of achieving the most effective methods of language teaching with special reference to the Irish language.

(ii) To help to promote the use of the most modern scientific methods in language teaching throughout the schools system by all possible means including the training of teachers and the provision of suitable teaching aids and materials.

(iii) To provide up-to-date information on linguistic developments, on the progress of language teaching methods, on language courses and on teaching aids and materials in other countries.

(iv) To advise on and to assist in the devising of suitable methods of assessing linguistic aptitude and attainment.

Planning, which is going on at present, envisages that the work of the Institute should be conducted according to a succession of three year programmes of projects concerning societal, psychological, pedagogical aspects of language, to be conducted by an interdisciplinary team.

Notes

1) Colmán L. Ó Huallacháin, "Bilingualism in Education in Ireland", Report of the Thirteenth Annual Round Table Meeting on Linguistics and Language Studies.
Georgetown University (1962), 81-83.

2) Colmán L. Ó Huallacháin, "An Dá-Theangachas seo Againne", Feasta, March, 1963, [translation]
John Macnamara, Bilingualism and Primary Education. A Study of Irish Experience, Edinburg University Press, (1966)

3) Máirtín Ó Murchú, Review of "Bilingualism and Primary Education" (Macnamara), Feasta October 1966. [translation]

4) Tomás de Bhaldraithe, "Language Laboratory, University College Dublin" Modern Languages in Great Britain and Ireland, Council for Cultural Cooperation, Strasbourg, 1967, 91-92.

5) Michael E. Krauss listed eighty-nine studies of the sounds of Irish in his unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, "Studies in Irish Gaelic Phonology and Orthography", Harvard University, 1958, 148-153.

6) An tSiúr Annuntiata le Muire, Colmán L. Ó Huallacháin, Bunchúrsa Foghraíochta, Government Stationery Office, Dublin, 1966.

7) Máirtín Ó Murchú, "Common Core and Underlying Forms, criterion for the construction of a phonological norm for Modern Irish" Ériu, XXI, 1969, 42-75.

8) Loc.cit., 43

9) Loc.cit.,44-45.

10) G.Goughenheim, P.Rivenc, R.Michea, A.Sauvegeot, L'Élaboration de francais fondamental (ler degré), Paris, 1964.

11) Buntús Gaeilge, Réamhthuarascáil, Government Stationery Office, Dublin, 1966.

12) Tomás Ó Domhnalláin, Buntús Cainte, Stationery Office, Dublin, 1967-68.

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